



Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to protecting the rural character and the viability of farms, residents, and businesses of the Snoqualmie River Valley.

SVPA.US

## **Watershed Improvement District Proposal: A locally-controlled, system-wide solution to managing water needs in the Lower Snoqualmie Valley**

### **Background**

Farmers, residents, and rural businesses in the lower Snoqualmie Valley know that there is always either too much or too little water for efficient agricultural production. Peak winter and early spring flows leave standing water until well into the spring, thus delaying the ability to get land into production. July and August bring very little rainfall, leaving market crops and fields without the water they need to thrive. A locally controlled Watershed Improvement District (WID) is proposed to address agricultural water needs, specifically to:

1. secure existing/historical agricultural water rights Valley-wide,
2. address agricultural drainage on a system-wide basis, and
3. obtain new sources of water for agricultural use.

### **What is a Watershed Improvement District?**

A watershed improvement district is a type of special purpose district, governed by landowners. It is unit of government apart from any particular city or county, with its own governance, staff and assessment authority, as granted by RCW Chapter 87.03. School districts, water and sewer, and hospital districts are common examples. While legally organized as an “irrigation” district, WIDs have statutory authority to work on a variety of issues – including water supply, water quality, drainage, and habitat restoration. The Snoqualmie Valley WID would be able to work on issues of greatest priority to landowners in the valley.

The boundaries of the proposed district include the agricultural production district and much of the 100-year floodplain from the lower Snoqualmie Falls to the King-Snohomish County line.

### **Why form a Watershed Improvement District?**

The District would be an entity empowered to work on issues of highest priority to landowners, and be an effective way to accomplish the following:

1. **Increase access to irrigation water:** the goal of the district is to secure access to 1,000 new acre/feet of water during the first five years. This will come from new, mitigated water rights and voluntary market-based transfer of existing water rights.
2. **Address drainage on a system-wide basis rather than parcel-by-parcel:** facilitate organization of adjacent landowners to solve drainage problems systemically. Streamline permitting and mitigation.

3. **Secure existing water rights:** provide a reliable, efficient, low-risk mechanism for landowners interested in validating their existing water rights, and to secure such rights for the future.
4. **Create an entity that is eligible to receive funding:** as a unit of government, the district would be eligible to enter into inter-local agreements and be eligible to receive local, state and federal funding for infrastructure and legal and technical assistance not otherwise available to individual private property owners. Potential funding sources include Washington State Department of Ecology, King Conservation District, King County Flood Control District, United States Department of Agriculture.
5. **Potentially augment instream flows while still meeting agricultural needs:** with a consolidated, basin-wide approach, the district could possibly assist in achieving water quality and habitat goals such as moving diversions from more sensitive tributaries to the mainstem, or from shallow wells to deep water wells to reduce impacts on aquatic resources.
6. **Explore integrated solutions to water problems:** infrastructure to store water at high flows and augment low flows for the benefit of all water users is a promising long term approach to water problems in the valley, but virtually impossible for an individual landowner. The district would have the authority to raise funds and support for environmentally responsible flood storage.
7. **A unified voice to advocate for Valley interests in the future:** water supply problems and drainage issues are likely to get worse, not better, in the future. A district can provide a unified voice for valley landowners and farmers in water policy discussions now and in the future.

**See attached for details and Frequently Asked Questions**

## **WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (WID) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

**1. How can a WID help me obtain new water rights?**

The goal of the district is to making 1,000 acre feet of additional water available in the next five years for irrigation in the Snoqualmie Valley through banking, water right transfers and mitigation. The WID will identify viable sources of new water rights for use within the district, and farmers would be able to acquire an incremental share, sized to meet individual needs.

**2. How can a WID help with drainage?**

The WID can address drainage in a sub-basin to ensure projects benefit all affected parcels, thus increasing efficiency and return on investment. The WID can streamline permitting and help with mitigation. The WID can also help secure funding for drainage projects from other agencies.

**3. How can a WID help secure my existing water rights?**

The WID can assist with protecting against relinquishment by providing low-risk opportunities to bank existing water rights and/or put them to beneficial use through voluntary temporary transfers.

**4. Can the WID do anything about flooding?**

The WID would have statutory authority to address flooding if the project is for the purpose of creating water supply. The WID would have the statutory authority to capture water during peak flows for later release.

**5. How is a new district formed and governed?**

Under state law, landowners determine the geographic boundaries of the district. If at least 50 landowners or the owners representing 50% of the land within the proposed district sign the petition to form the WID, then King County conducts a special election. The WID is approved if it receives two thirds of votes cast. The election on whether to create the WID also includes an election of the initial Board of Directors for the WID, which can be three, five, or seven members. Each landowner receives two votes for every five acres of assessable land within the proposed WID.

**6. Who signs the petition and votes on creating a district and for the Board of Directors?**

The WID would generally only apply to agricultural parcels of a certain size, in this case, two acres or more. Owners of smaller parcels or those not capable of agricultural use are not included in the WID and would not vote. The petition to create a WID can be signed by any eligible landowner, regardless of that person's citizenship. In the election to create the WID, eligible voters are those landowners who are U.S. citizens and residents of the state. After a WID is formed, the WID Board

has the authority to add new land to the WID if those landowners want to be included, and can also exclude lands from the WID.

**7. Why organize under the state’s irrigation district law, rather than a different structure?**

The irrigation district statute offers agricultural landowners control over whether a district should be created, how it is funded, and which issues it chooses to take on. Only landowners are included within the district and have authority to vote on the question of whether a WID should be created, and for the Board of Directors. In addition, WIDs have authority to address many different issues affecting agriculture, unlike other types of entities which only have authority over a single issue such as drainage, but lack authority to address other issues. While created independently from counties, cities, and other governmental entities, WIDs have a close working relationship with other forms of local government.

**8. How would the district be funded?**

Districts have a variety of funding options, which all share the requirement that a landowner can only be assessed an amount equal to his or her benefit received. Unlike general purpose governments or some other types of districts that have taxing authority, these districts only have assessment authority for actions that benefit agricultural landowners. Typically, a district will establish a general assessment level that is applied on a per acreage basis. Districts can also create special assessments for projects that apply to only a specific area of the district, and such a special assessment must be voted on by those landowners. In addition, these districts are eligible to receive grants from state and federal governments and from other sources.

**9. If the WID is created, what will the initial assessment costs be to landowners?**

Once the district is formed, RCW Chapter 87.03 states that the rate per acre is set by the district commissioners, who are elected by landowners. Rates ranging from three to ten dollars per acre have been discussed. This is expected to cover primarily administrative, technical, and operational costs; specific projects cost are expected to be funded through landowner cost-share and inter-local agreements from agencies such as the King County, Flood Control District, the Conservation District or Department of Ecology.

**10. What are the key issues for the WID to work on?**

Landowner-elected commissioners will set the WID’s priorities and the work program, and the district may work on any projects as described in RCW Chapter 87.03, including water supply, water quality, drainage, and habitat restoration. The SVPA has begun to work with King Conservation District on a needs assessment for drainage; these results will be helpful to the WID once formed.

**11. What is the timeline for creating the Snoqualmie Valley WID?**

The landowner working group (see below) is in the process of developing the petition for landowner review by March 31. If there is enough landowner support, an election could be held as early as July, 2015. The WID could be in place before the 2016 growing season.

**12. Are there any other Watershed Improvement Districts in Western Washington?**

Six WIDs have been formed in Western Washington in recent years: two in the Bertrand Creek and North Lynden Watersheds in 2003 and 2007 respectively. These were so successful, that landowners formed four more such districts in Whatcom County in November 2014.

**13. What is the SVPA’s involvement in the WID formation?**

Any group that meets the requirements described in RCW 87.03.020 can propose the formation of a district. The SVPA has taken the lead at the request of valley landowners, and because it is consistent with its mission to address matters that affect viability of farmers, residents and rural businesses in the Snoqualmie Valley.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture has provided funding to SVPA through the Specialty Crop Block Grant to identify water supply strategies, a required component of the WID formation. The SVPA, through other grants and the generosity of its donors, will cover the balance of the cost of forming the district.

**14. Who are the individuals supporting this effort and how do I learn more?**

SVPA has assembled a landowner working group and staff support for the project, including the following members:

- Michael Blakely, Growing Things Farm, Carnation
- Jim Haack, KT Cattle Company, Duvall
- Erick Haakenson, Jubilee Farm, Carnation
- Gary Remlinger, Remlinger Farms, Carnation
- Jason Roetecisoender, Green Acres Farm, Duvall
- Andrew Stout, Full Circle Farm, Carnation
- Luke Woodward, Oxbow Farm, Duvall
- Cynthia Krass, Staff/Executive Director, Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance
- Bill Clarke, Consultant/Attorney at Law, Clarke Law, Olympia

For more information, or to be included in the working group, please contact Cynthia Krass, Executive Director, SVPA, [cynthia@svpa.us](mailto:cynthia@svpa.us), 425-922-5725 or visit [www.svpa.us](http://www.svpa.us).